

MONTAIGNIAN MEDITATIONS

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ABSTRACT: In *Pascalian Meditations*, Pierre Bourdieu counters Husserl's disembodied, solipsistic Cartesian subjectivity with his well-known notion of habitus—that is, the self as embodied history, a history internalized as second nature and thus forgotten as history. Bourdieu turns to Blaise Pascal—the great anti-Cartesian—not only for inspiration but in order to establish a new interpretive ethos that transcends the seemingly intractable dilemma between objectivism and subjectivism. Bourdieu credits his predecessor with refusing to perpetuate philosophy's self-blindness, exposing the subject of philosophy's wretched condition, its mixture of reason and affect. This article looks to Michel de Montaigne as an alternative to Bourdieu's own Pascalian counter-model. This effort is not so much a critique of Bourdieu's Pascalian model as an attempt to pursue a different type of critical dialogue with philosophy. If Bourdieu's Pascalian alternative runs the risk of severing dialogue with contemporary philosophy, transforming Descartes' solipsistic meditations into sociological meditations on symbolic power, Montaignian meditations are more hospitable to and yet not any less critical of philosophical thinking—be it ancient, humanist or contemporary.

KEY WORDS: self, otherness, unruliness, scepticism, Bourdieu.

RESUMEN: En las *Meditaciones Pascalianas*, Pierre Bourdieu responde a la subjetividad cartesiana descorporalizada y solipsista de Husserl con su bien conocida noción de habitus, esto es, la historia corporeizada del yo, una historia interiorizada como segunda naturaleza y, en consecuencia, olvidada también como historia. Bourdieu se vuelve a Blaise Pascal —el gran anticartesiano— no solamente para inspirarse, sino también para establecer un nuevo ethos interpretativo capaz de trascender el aparente dilema entre la subjetividad y la objetividad. Bourdieu reconoce a su predecesor el rechazo a perpetuar la autoceguera de la filosofía exponiendo el tema de la miseria de la filosofía. Este artículo trata de ver a Montaigne como una alternativa al contramodelo pascaliano del propio Bourdieu. Si bien el artículo no se presenta tanto como una crítica al mismo como un esfuerzo por la búsqueda de un diálogo crítico diferente. Si la alternativa pascaliana de Bourdieu corre el riesgo de transformar el solipsismo cartesiano en unas meditaciones sociológicas sobre el poder simbólico, las meditaciones montaignianas son mucho más hospitalarias y no tan críticas con el pensamiento filosófico, ya sea éste antiguo, moderno o contemporáneo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: anomia, alteridad, Bourdieu, escepticismo, ipseidad.

In *Cartesian Meditations*, Edmund Husserl expresses his fidelity to René Descartes' project, to his «turn to the subject» by adopting the Cartesian *cogito* for the purpose of transcendental philosophy. Like Descartes, Husserl calls on the philosopher to «withdraw into himself» in order to «reflect on how [he] might find a method for going on, a method that promises to lead to genuine knowing».¹ In *Pascalian Meditations*, Pierre Bourdieu counters Husserl's disembodied, solipsistic Cartesian subjectivity with his well-known notion of *habitus*—that is, the self as embodied history, a history internalized as second nature and thus forgotten as history. Bourdieu turns to Blaise Pascal—the great anti-Cartesian—not only for inspiration but in order to establish a new interpretive ethos that transcends the seemingly intractable dilemma opposing objectivism to subjectivism. «We are as much automatic as intellectual,» Bourdieu favorably quotes Pascal.² Bourdieu credits his predecessor for refusing to perpetuate philosophy's self-blindness, exposing the subject of philosophy's wretched condition, its mixture of reason and affect. In this article, I propose that we look to Michel de Montaigne as an alternative to Bourdieu's own Pascalian counter-model. This effort is not so much a critique of Bourdieu's Pascalian model as an attempt to pursue a different type of critical dialogue with philosophy. If Bourdieu's Pascalian alternative risks severing a dialogue with contemporary philosophy, transforming Descartes' solipsistic meditations into sociological meditations on symbolic power, Montaignian meditations are more hospitable to and yet not any less critical of philosophical thinking—be it ancient, humanist or contemporary.

What would philosophy look like if the «turn to the subject» were conceived as a turn to the Montaignian subject? A number of postmodernists have taken up this very call over the last thirty years. In the hands of Jean-François Lyotard, for instance, Montaigne becomes a philosopher of the contingent, one who eschews systematic thought and the hermeneutic comfort of «grand narratives.» «The essay (Montaigne) is postmodern,» as Lyotard succinctly put it.³ Renaissance scholars may view Lyotard's reading of Montaigne as audaciously anachronistic: How can Montaigne be postmodern if modernity *as such* must await the arrival of Descartes?⁴ Yet if Montaigne is not postmodern, and he predates Cartesian modernity, should we then label him a pre- or early modern philosopher? Any answer must take into account Montaigne's reflections on the uniqueness of his mode of inquiry. Montaigne did not see himself as merely contributing to a pre-existing humanist *Zeitgeist*; in a late addition to «De l'Affectation des Pères aux Enfants», the essayist, breaking with the modesty topos, insists on the

¹ EDMUND HUSSERL, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991), 2.

² PIERRE BOURDIEU, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 12.

³ JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, «Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?», trans. RÉGIS DURANT, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

⁴ The charge of anachronism widely prevalent in early modern scholarship should be subjected to equally rigorous analysis, and not give the accuser a false sense of hermeneutic security, since any critic, as François Rigolot argues, must avoid not only anachronism — «la projection aberrante du présent sur le passé» — but also catachronism: «l'illusion, toute aussi aberrante, de pouvoir saisir le passé indépendamment du présent qui conditionne la saisie» (RIGOLOTT, «Interpréter Rabelais aujourd'hui: anachronies et catachronies,» *Poétique* 103 [1995]: 270).

singularity of his book, «le seul livre au monde de son espece» (II, 8, 385c). Nor did the *Essais* offer their audience another philosopher, a «Sénèque françois» as many of his early readers felt him to be.⁵ Quite the contrary, in a late addition to the «Apologie de Raymond Sebond,» Montaigne highlighted his departure from the philosophical tradition, presenting himself as «[une] nouvelle figure: un philosophe impremedité et fortuite» (II, 12, 546c).⁶ From a postmodern perspective, we might be tempted to describe this «nouvelle figure» as that of an *accidental theorist* (rather than an accidental philosopher⁷), if we understand theory as a skeptical ethos, a resistance to philosophy's logocentric ambitions, that is, to philosophy's timeless dream of perfection⁸ (the pre- and post-Cartesian desire for unmediated Being, the Thing itself, etc.). If Montaigne began as a philosopher, committed to hermeneutic self-mastery *à la Seneca*⁹ (as expressed in his desire to be «maistre de [s]oy, à tout sens» [III, 5, 841b]), he did so only to come full circle, taking Seneca's observation that «for anything that can be added to is imperfect»¹⁰ as a condition for productive thinking rather than a prohibition.

⁵ François Garasse, quoted in OLIVIER MILLET, *La Première réception des Essais de Montaigne* (1580-1640) (Paris: Champion, 1995), 199. Similarly, Estienne Pasquier described Montaigne as «un autre Senèque en notre langue» (Millet 146).

⁶ References are from *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, ed Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier (Paris: PUF, 1965): citations are by book, essay, and page. The letters a, b, c, indicate the three major textual strata corresponding to the 1580, 1588, and 1595 editions. References to the book and chapter will be omitted whenever they can be clearly inferred from the context.

⁷ Taking Montaigne's moment of self-discovery (as an «accidental philosopher») as her point of departure, Ann Hartle systematically proceeds to elucidate the full meaning of Montaigne's observation. What emerges from her reading is a radical thinker who breaks with ancient philosophy and medieval theology. As would be expected in a book about Montaigne's philosophy, skepticism plays a major role in Hartle's positive assessment of the essayist. She asks: «Does skepticism provide us with a complete and adequate understanding of Montaigne's philosophical activity?» (HARTLE, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 15). She thinks that it does not. «Montaigne is not a skeptic», as she clearly puts it. Yet, Hartle never really considers skepticism as something proper to the Montaignian essay, where skepticism *as such* is reducible neither to a doctrine or instrumentality. Seeing Montaigne as an *accidental theorist* is, in this respect, an attempt to imagine a kind of skepticism that would be co-extensive with the unruly movement of the essay. Similarly, Lawrence Kritzman describes Montaigne as a kind of theorist *avant la lettre*: «For Montaigne, philosophy is an impossible engagement since he views thought as a destabilizing agent that is open to constant revision. The essayist doubts the possibility of attaining closure in the act of interpretation. . . . The consequences of this phenomenon, in the quest for self-knowledge, suggest that Montaigne must theorize the human subject at the limit of the theorizable» (KRITZMAN, *The Fabulous Imagination: On Montaigne's Essays* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2009], 2).

⁸ «Philosophy», writes the Neoplatonist Hierocles of Alexandria, «is a purification and perfection of human life: a purification from our irrational, material nature and the mortal form of the body, a perfection by the recovery of our proper happiness, leading to divine likeness» (*The Commentary of Hierocles the Philosopher on the Pythagorean Verses*, trans. and ed. Hermann S. Schibli, in *Hierocles of Alexandria* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 170).

⁹ While the desire for self-mastery, an aspiration originating in Plato's Socrates, is perhaps as old as philosophy itself, it is especially prevalent in ancient Stoicism. As Pierre Hadot points out, «For the Stoic . . . doing philosophy meant practicing how to 'live,' . . . giv[ing] up desiring that which does not depend on us and is beyond our control, so as to attach ourselves only to what depends on us: actions which are just and in conformity with reason» (PIERRE HADOT, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase [New York: Blackwell, 1995], 86).

¹⁰ SENECA, *Epistles*. Loeb Classical Library, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 72.7.

It is worth underscoring here that what Lyotard considers postmodern about Montaigne when he writes that «the essay (Montaigne) is postmodern» is not something about his ideas (the *content* of his philosophy) but rather their enactment (the *form* of his philosophy), echoing, as it were, Montaigne's own musings on his reading and writing practices:

(b) Nous sommes sur la *maniere*, non sur la *matiere* du dire.... (c) Et tous les jours m'amuse à lire en des auteurs sans *soing* de leur *science*, y cherchant leur *façon*, non leur *subject*. Tout ainsi que je poursuy la communication de quelque esprit fameux, non affin qu'il m'enseigne, mais affin que je le cognoisse. (III, 8, 928, emphasis added)

Qu'on ne s'attende aux *matieres*, mais à la *façon* que j'y donne. (II, 10, 408a, emphasis added)

If Lyotard identifies the (Montaignian) essay with postmodernity, other thinkers interpreted the essay more generally, associating it with the very mode of philosophical critique. Theodor Adorno defined the essay in anti-Cartesian terms, as a form of thought that «gently defies the ideals of *clara et distincta perceptio* and of absolute certainty.»¹¹ And Michel Foucault located the essay at the heart of the philosophical enterprise; the essay —«the living substance of philosophy»— does not legitimate «what is already known,» but rather desires to know «to what extent it might be possible to think differently.»¹² Liberating in an oblique, rather than straightforward way, the essay works to expand thought and to create new ways of thinking: it unavoidably imposes form on thought but a kind of form that relentlessly refuses its own homogenization, and tries to think beyond its own cognitive limits.

Does this way of framing Montaigne's philosophical import give his skepticism too much weight? Are we ignoring his own warnings about skepticism? In the «Apologie de Raimond Sebond,» Montaigne considers skepticism a desperate effort, a tool to be deployed only as a last resort:

Ce dernier tour d'escrime icy, il ne le faut employer que comme un extreme remede. C'est un coup desesperé, auquel il faut abandonner vos armes pour faire perdre à vostre adversaire les siennes, et un tour secret, duquel il se faut servir rarement et reservément. C'est grande temerité de vous perdre vous mesmes pour perdre un autre. (II, 12, 558a)

Skepticism is a *pharmakon*; it can function either as a remedy or a poison. It entails, then, a perpetual sense of vulnerability—the risk of self-loss. Moreover, Montaigne perceives a certain limitation if not contradiction among Pyrrhonists with respect to language:

¹¹ THEODOR ADORNO, «The Essay as Form», trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique* 32 (1984): 61.

¹² MICHEL FOUCAULT, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 9. Thomas Flynn also has remarked of the affinities between Montaignian essayistic skepticism and the skeptical attitude informing Foucault's critique of rationality: «[Foucault's] is a skepticism more in line with Montaigne's '*Que sais-je?*' than with the obviously self-defeating form, 'I can't be certain of anything'» («Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at Collège de France», in *The Final Foucault*, eds. James W. Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988), 113).

Je voy les philosophes Pyrrhoniens qui ne peuvent exprimer leur generale conception en aucune maniere de parler: car il leur faudroit un nouveau langage. Le nostre est tout formé de propositions affirmatives, qui leur sont du tout ennemies: de façon que, quand ils disent: Je doute, on les tient incontinent à la gorge pour leur faire avouer qu'au-moins assurent et sçavent ils cela, qu'ils doutent. (527a)

Unlike the ancient skeptics and their «performative contradiction,» Montaigne appears to acknowledge that his language is the language of affirmative propositions. From this perspective, Montaigne was tempted by the Pyrrhonists, but the temptation, better known as his «skeptical crisis» was indeed short-lived.

But to argue that Montaigne simply overcame his skepticism (for ethical reasons) and opted for coherence and the language of affirmative propositions (for epistemological reasons) is to assume that skepticism and the essay form are conceptually separable, that the former can be discarded without altering the thrust of the latter. Here skepticism is understood merely in terms of a series of propositions that Montaigne ultimately rejects, because, as the argument goes, «he had something positive to say and something urgent.»¹³ Yet a closer look at the above passage from the «Apologie» might suggest a different relation to skepticism. Montaigne's comment «il leur faudroit un nouveau langage» (the conditional «faudroit» underscores the irreality of this language) functions not only as a critique of the Pyrrhonist position (their use of language involves self-refutation) but as an incitement to imagine the possibility of a different language of skepticism: skepticism as a form of thought inseparable from this language *à venir*. While Pyrrhonists themselves were unable to formulate their radical doubt, Montaigne's reader is *obliquely* invited to turn to Montaigne's *essay*, to his own practice of skepticism, a practice that sustains the open-endedness of the essayistic process and does not transform itself into dogmatism, or «un Pyrrhonisme sous une forme resolutive» (507a). In this light, we might think of the passing reference to this absent «nouveau langage» as describing the language of the essay, in ways that may have exceeded even Montaigne's own imagination.¹⁴ The newness of this skeptical language might figure as well in Montaigne's scandalous question «Que sçay-je?» (527b). Robert Eaglestone sums up well the ethical force of the interrogative: «Unlike a statement, a question is to be interrupted: a question starts a dialogue. An idea phrased as a question resists closure and begs not only an answer but another question, an interruption».¹⁵

But what of Montaigne's warnings about the dangers of ancient skepticism, its potential to do more harm than good? Are we to turn a blind eye to these earlier concerns? Again, the question «Que say-je?» enables Montaigne to circumvent the pitfalls of traditional skepticism (paralysis or dogmatism). Montaigne's skepticism is at once captured and sustained by this interrogative. In this respect, the language of the

¹³ DAVID QUINT, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy. Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), xiv. Quint bases his reading on Pierre Villey, *Les Sources et l'évolution des «Essais» de Montaigne* (Paris: Librairie de Hachette, 1933), in which the author argued that Montaigne's thought evolved through three stages: Stoicism, Skepticism, and Naturalism (Epicureanism).

¹⁴ See ANDRÉ TOURNON, «Route par ailleurs: Le «nouveau langage» des Essais (Paris: Champion, 2006).

¹⁵ ROBERT EAGLESTONE, *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 139.

essay is «a performative doing that cannot be reduced to a constative description».¹⁶ It is a language that puts its practitioner at odds with the philosophical tradition. In this sense, Montaigne's skepticism, like all skepticism, emerges as philosophy's disavowed child to paraphrase Emmanuel Levinas.¹⁷ Yet unlike other skepticisms, Montaignian skepticism actively works to break the Platonist mold of traditional philosophy, seeking a Nietzschean transvaluation of skepticism; in short, Montaigne's skepticism returns as philosophy's illegitimate *and* unruly child.

Like Nietzsche, who critically called for a reappraisal of the world of appearance—conceiving of it outside the static opposition of appearance and reality («We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps?... But no! *With the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*»)¹⁸—Montaigne alters the received meaning of skepticism, compelling his readers to question the desirability of logocentric plenitude, short-circuiting the inherited Platonist system of thought and its paradigmatic model of self-mastery. The ancient ideal of self-mastery ties together two ancient injunctions: «Know yourself» (*gnōthi seauton*) and «Take care of the self» (*epimeleia heautou*). As the late Foucault put it, in the Greco-Roman culture «the injunction of having to know yourself was always associated with the other principle of having to take care of yourself, and it was that need to care for oneself that brought the Delphic maxim into operation».¹⁹ For Foucault, the rise of the confessional model (which transformed self-knowledge into a kind of self-renunciation), the increased emphasis on morality as an external, rule-governed affair (against which self-knowledge functioned as a mode of resistance—the individual knower versus the hegemony of social morality), the reduction of self-knowledge to a purely cognitive matter (what he dubbed the «Cartesian moment»²⁰), all have led to eclipsing the care of the self from philosophical inquiry.²¹ While Foucault's untimely death left his genealogical project incomplete, he did briefly speculate about Montaigne's contribution to this ancient culture of self-care: «I think Montaigne should be reread from this perspective, as an attempt to reconstitute an aesthetics and an ethics of the self».²² An investigation of

¹⁶ SIMON CRITCHLEY, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 7.

¹⁷ LEVINAS, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 7.

¹⁸ NIETZSCHE, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 51. While Montaigne seems to advocate a philosophy of becoming—«Je ne peints pas l'être. Je peints le passage» (III, 2, 805b)—his brand of becoming must be reconceptualized beyond the static being/becoming distinction, where the latter is understood as an imperfect or incomplete manifestation of the former.

¹⁹ FOUCAULT, «Technologies of the Self», in *Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 20.

²⁰ FOUCAULT, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 14.

²¹ FOUCAULT, «Technologies of the Self», 22.

²² FOUCAULT, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 251. For a discussion of Montaigne and the late Foucault, see Reinier Leushuis' «Montaigne Parrhesiastes: Foucault's Fearless Speech and Truth-telling in the *Essays*», MARC SCHACHTER'S «'Qu'est-ce que la critique?' La Boétie, Montaigne, Foucault» and Virginia Krause's «Confession or parrhesia? Foucault after Montaigne» in *Montaigne After Theory, Theory After Montaigne*, ed. ZAHY ZALLOUA (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

Montaigne's potential role in this culture—as one of its last inheritors—opens up the possibility of radically rethinking the type of subjectivity that has faithfully informed philosophical discourse since the advent of the Cartesian *cogito*.

Locating, or better yet, unearthing in Montaigne's writings a pre-Cartesian or postmodern care of the self is also, as I've argued, inseparable from attending to the form of the essay and the type of skepticism that it affords. Like his intellectual predecessors, Montaigne's *Essais* foreground self-writing as a modality of self-care, intimately tying his self-fashioning to his textual performance:

Me peignant pour autrui, je me suis peint en moy de couleurs plus nettes que n'estoyent les miennes premieres. *Je n'ay pas plus fait mon livre que mon livre m'a fait, livre consubstantiel à son auteur*, d'une occupation propre, membre de ma vie; non d'une occupation et fin tierce et estrangere comme tous autres livres. (II, 18, 665c, emphasis added).

With his well-known consubstantiality thesis —*he has no more made his book than his book has made him*— Montaigne underscores his writing's «*ethopoietic* function»,²³ its status as an agent of transformation. In other words, Montaigne's essayistic writing creates (*poesis*) as much as it represents (*mimesis*). But what kind of philosophical being does it produce? What kind of being is this «philosophe impremedité et fortuite»? In his liminal essay «De l'oisiveté», Montaigne stages for his readers the philosophical scene. In the beginning was the dream of solitary contemplation:

Dernierement que je me retiray chez moy, deliberé autant que je pourroy, ne me mesler d'autre chose que de passer en repos, et à part, ce peu qui me reste de vie: il me sembloit ne pouvoir faire plus grande faveur à mon esprit, que de le laisser en pleine oysiveté, s'entretenir soy mesmes, et s'arrester et rasseoir en soy: ce que j'esperois qu'il peut meshuy faire plus aisément, devenu avec le temps plus poissant, et plus meur. (I, 8, 33a)

Then, came the recognition of his failure to simply translate old age into wisdom, into self-knowledge and self-mastery—into the ideal of *stasis*, an ideal revered by the Senecan sage:

Mais je trouve... que au rebours, faisant le cheval eschappé, il se donne cent fois plus d'affaire à soy mesmes, qu'il n'en prenoit pour autrui; et m'enfante tant de chimeres et monstres fantasques les uns sur les autres, sans ordre, et sans propos, que pour en contempler à mon aise l'ineptie et l'estrangeté, j'ay commencé de les mettre en rolle... (33a)

Montaigne the Stoic humanist in the pursuit of intellectual leisure suddenly metamorphoses into Montaigne the theorist of the unruly/his unruliness. At this stage, Montaigne's ideas or *fantaisies* evoke defiance and frustration. By describing his mind as a «cheval eschappé» and its thoughts as «chimeres et monstres fantasques», Montaigne from the start recognizes his subject matter's profound indocility, the self's challenge to hermeneutic mastery. Not conducive to conceptuality—to the formation of

²³ FOUCAULT, «Self Writing», in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 209.

concepts for the purpose of interpretive mastery — the essay sustains rather than tames Montaigne's unruly *fantaisies*. The author's original desire to impose a discursive order on his mind's formless thoughts, «esperant avec le temps luy en faire honte à luy mesmes» (33a), proves unsuccessful, as evidenced by his reference to them in a later essay as «crottesques et corps monstrueux» (I, 28, 183a).

As the matter of his book, Montaigne constantly probes «les ressorts» (II, 17, 634a) of his mind, but his meditations yield no concrete foundational knowledge. Purposive inquiry is met at every turn with textual resistance; indeed, an irreducible gap between intention and outcome structures the writings of the *Essais*: «Je ne me trouve pas où je me cherche; et me trouve plus par rencontre que par l'inquisition de mon jugement» (I, 10, 40c).²⁴ Contingency rather than necessity guides the unfolding of Montaigne's *Essais*. Jacques Lacan will echo this Montaignian insight in his dismantling of the *cogito*: «I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think».²⁵ In a later work, Lacan will evoke Montaigne explicitly as a singular author whose self-writing prefigures the psychoanalytic notion of the split subject:

I would show you that Montaigne is truly the one who has centred himself, not around scepticism but around the living moment of the *aphanisis* of the subject. And it is in this that he is fruitful, that he is an eternal guide, who goes beyond whatever may be represented of the moment to be defined as a historical turning-point.²⁶

Lacan's interest in Montaigne lies in his avoidance of both skepticism and the path of the *cogito*. The skeptics' «heroic» adherence to the «subjective position that *one can know nothings*»²⁷ and Descartes' grounding of certainty in the self-evidence of the *cogito* result in the perpetuation of subjectivity. Montaigne offers a radical alternative: a subject paradoxically constituted by its own fading or disappearance (*aphanisis*). On Lacan's reading, what differentiates Montaigne from the early modern skeptic is that the essayist persists in his self-undoing, short-circuiting the skeptic's motto, «*I cannot know*». Yet Lacan's brief assessment ignores the essayist's critical engagement with this ancient school of thought. Lacan is surely correct to distance Montaigne from those who adopt the skeptic motto, and in this respect, Lacan is arguably far more sensitive to the unsettling force of the *Essais* than Pierre Charron, one of Montaigne's early disciples, who rewrote Montaigne's motto («que sçay-je?»), preferring the more tame and readable skeptical claim «*Je ne sçay*» which he engraved on the title page of his revised *De la sagesse* (1604).²⁸ Lacan, however, overstates the case against Montaigne's skepticism.

²⁴ Montaigne's *Essais* fragments and multiplies: «Moy à cette heure et moy tantost sommes bien deux» (III, 9, 964c).

²⁵ JACQUES LACAN, «The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud», *Écrits: a Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 166.

²⁶ LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 223-24.

²⁷ LACAN, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 223.

²⁸ For a comparative reading of Montaigne and Charron, see THIERRY GONTIER, «Charron face à Montaigne. Stratégies du scepticisme» in *Montaigne et la question de l'homme*, ed. Marie-Luce Demonet (Paris: PUF, 1999), 103-43.

If Charron violently negates Montaigne's «que sçay-je?», Lacan conveniently sets it aside, silencing, in turn, Montaigne's skeptical voice as well.

The challenge here is to apprehend what we could call the «Montaignian moment» of *aphanisis* in light of Montaigne's creative appropriation of the ancient culture of self-care: Can we think the self in Montaigne's care of the self *otherwise than being*,²⁹ outside the philosophical tradition that privileges being as a knowable self-presence? Montaigne's reflections on his self, or better yet, his reflections on the psychic effects of self-study hint at such a possibility:

Et n'ay veu monstre et miracle au monde plus expres que moy-mesme. On s'apprivoise à toute estrangeté par l'usage et le temps; mais plus je me hante et me connois, plus ma difformité m'estonne, moins je m'entens en moy. (III, 11, 1029b).

Compare with Descartes' observation about his epistemological situation:

Et ainsi m'entretenant seulement moi-même, et considérant mon intérieur, je tâcherai de me rendre peu à peu plus connu et plus familier à moi-même. Je suis une chose qui pense...³⁰

Whereas Descartes' meditations assume a teleological arc (and, as we know, his *Méditations* fully delivered on these stated aims), Montaigne's suggest the absence of any cognitive return on his epistemic investment. Far from resulting in a privileged access to one's being, essayistic self-study defamiliarizes and astonishes its practitioner. It discloses reason in its utter weakness or lameness; like a cripple, reason limps. The essay fails to possess meaning and secure the foundations for self-knowledge; yet, in its failure, reason—under the pressure of the essaying process—paradoxically succeeds in revealing to its author his irreducible alterity, his own semiotic monstrosity. As if directly responding to the surplus of meaning and the excesses of the Montaignian self, to the self's internal otherness, Descartes moves to pathologize the destabilizing experience of *étonnement*, writing in *Les Passions de l'âme*: «L'étonnement est un excès d'admiration qui ne peut jamais être que mauvais».³¹

Recovering the «Montaignian moment» for contemporary philosophy requires troubling such a colonization of wonder and difference, opening up a hermeneutic space to hear Montaigne's anti-Cartesian voice, his promise for a care of *the other*: «[a] Je n'ay point cette erreur commune de juger d'un autre selon que je suis.... Je... [c] reçois plus facilement la difference que la ressemblance en nous. Je... le considere simplement en luy-mesme, sans relation, l'estoffant sur son propre modele» (I, 37, 229, emphasis added). So cognizant of his own unruliness and foreignness to himself, how can Montaigne ever assert the transparency and homogeneity of the other?

²⁹ This expression belongs to Emmanuel Levinas. See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*.

³⁰ RENE DESCARTES, *Méditations*, in *Œuvres et lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 284.

³¹ DESCARTES, *Les Passions de l'âme*, in *Œuvres et lettres*, 729. For a rewarding analysis of the incommensurable differences between Montaigne and Descartes, see Hassan Melhy, *Writing Cogito: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).